Woman Police Deputy Writer of Poetry

Mrs. Ellen O'Grady Not So Keen About Freud, but Believes in the Psychological Moment

Ardently Interested in Her Special Task of Preventing Sex Crime and Confident of Eventual Success

MRS. ELLEN O'GRADY.
FIFTH DEPUTY POLICE COMMISSIONER

By DJUNA BARNES.

IMAGINE a day on Centre street, overcast and threatening rain; a day through which shuffle flickering tramps like wicks that are dying; Centre street with its hurrying business men, its thin clerks carrying brief bags, the Criminal Courts Building, that edifice of anti-climaxes on whose steps people are obscured into a sameness of sorrow—men with hurt mouths, women in black talking in Italian and children playing noiselessly, as if they were the innocent ashes of some despair; imagine the cries of some one in a vacant lot raised high above the multitude on a soap box, with wide, imploring, heedless arms crying for volunteers; then imagine the long, cold corridors of Police Headquarters, the uniformed men with their badges winking sleepily above their hearts, the rows of prize beakers in a glass case and then the room on whose door is the sign "Fifth Deputy Commissioner." In here, by an imposing and legal desk, in a blue serge dress trimmed with lace, sits a well built woman, her face at once stern and humorous. Imagine all this and you have the environs and the person of Mrs. Ellen O'Grady, Fifth Deputy Police Commissioner.

Nose of Gentle Modelling.

Her eyes are set close together and slanting, the nose is of gentle modelling, and the mouth one of which one would say, "That moves for the State." My first impression was of a woman who was afraid of being too homelike in an office of business.

She is a woman to whom you put impersonal questions last. Therefore I asked her about her immediate work.

"I am interested in the saving of girls before they have taken the last step," she said. "I do not mean that I am not also interested in and careful of the girl who has already fallen—that goes without saying; but I do think that more things should be done to prevent and less to attempt cures. It is better far to save a girl before she is in dire need of saving than to try to save her after it is too late; not but that girls can be reclaimed, but is it not better never to have made a mistake than to have made one?" .

She went on, turning over a ruler: "True, I believe in the benefits of suffering; the worst of us are always better for having done something for which we can truly suffer; but there are some who can be saved and yet gain their knowledge and be as purified as if they had gone through the last fires and out on the other side of Fiddler's Green." For the first time she smiled a little.

"I believe in women; I love them; there is a kindliness and an understanding and a sympathy in women that no one, not even an animal, possesses—oh, you needn't smile at the animal; they are unequalled for blind devotion, which of course has its limits.

"Because of this love of beauty, because of this reaching out for something better and brighter and of more worth our girls fall into trouble. It is for this very reason that those cast into the shadow by poverty and ignorance, by pain and suffering, by neglect and misfortune, grope toward the only thing that they know as beautiful. It is for this reason that since the war there have been more cases of small girls going astray.

"Let me explain."

She turned around in her chair facing the window.

"Somehow a uniform has always appealed to a woman—it appeals to men also, but they can wear it, you see—she connects it with something holy and something to be investigated, something at once to be venerated and to be familiar with. For a girl of fourteen, and the girls who go astray are younger than ever, nothing has ever come so close to her dreams as these uniforms. Anything she might do is jumbled up with a sort of patriotic fanaticism; thus she pretends to herself that her feelings are somehow made divine and noble."

"How then are you going to prevent it?"

"I look into those conditions which are likely to lead up to such a climax. Now take, for instance, the girls doing messenger service. They have to go through the back entries of houses—or so I have been advised. When such a case is brought to my attention I write to the company employing them and ask that they be allowed to enter through the front.

"And then, too," she continued with some firmness, "there is the problem of the 'masher,' a man who is not only a nuisance to himself, but a menace to humanity. I mean to see to it that young girls are shielded from the attentions of these men.

Lures for Very Young Girls.

"The first thing to do is to watch furtive sweetmeat shops, with their rows of bottles filled with brilliantly colored soda water fruit syrups, and the little back rooms; the pseudo motion picture schools, which help to recruit the great army that Lecky spoke of as the 'sacrifice on the altar of the nation's purity'; the spurious 'theatrical agency' and all the many other forms used to lure young girls to their ruin.

"You will realize that there could hardly be a more important thing to tackle, unless, of course, you mention the matter of national defence."

"Do you think that general public service is unfit for women?"

"I most certainly do. Such work as that of the street car conductor and running an elevator is very bad for women; they are subject to the passing insults of the crowd. You will say that women are subject to this anyway; that is quite true, but in ordinary life they are in a better position to protest."

"And," said I, "what do you think of crime in general? To me personally it has a strong appeal—I like crime, provided it is well committed."

She smiled, shaking her head: "That sounds nice, but of course that is the artist's point of view. Crime, murder, love, hate, all appeal to the artist; but you see," she added, "there are only a very few artists in the world, and the unavoidable crimes will always be enough for them.

"The criminal who is one through a moment's great feeling, through a sudden climax of passions, I forgive always in my heart. There is so little feeling in the world that even when it takes the wrong method of expressing itself it is something that the world cannot do without. There is too little love and therefore no really great and profound hate; too few people move with a 'certain somber fury.'"

No Hope of Ending Crime.

"Will crime ever be uprooted? That is, will the court and the judgment seat and the prisons ever be done away with?"

"Never, not so long as humanity is inhuman. The gallows tree has not shut the mouth of all the angers, nor has the rope strangled the universal cry of despair."

"But the cause of most crime, is it not poverty?"

"Oh, yes; poverty is the greatest of all evils, because people do not understand how to be poor. Poverty drives the children into the street, we all know that, and from there to the saloons, but why? Because their own homes are not only poor but dirty."

"But soap costs money, Mrs. O'Grady."

"I know, I know, but some there are who have proved their divine ability, some who reach heaven little but skin and bones, but this kind He loves best."

"The sum of thy past agony shall shake
The very marrow of thy bones, and move
The oblivious skin upon thy nerveless veins"—I quoted.

Mrs. O'Grady looked up sharply.

"What is that?" she inquired. "I too love poetry, but there!" she added sighing. "I must learn not to speak of poetry in business hours."

"But you yourself write it, I have heard."

"Oh, yes: I write it, but I do not speak of it excepting to those nearest me, my daughters, a friend or two, and that is all."

"Yet," said I, "what of:

"O marvellous man, must thy heart beat high
As with frozen limbs 'neath the Northern sky
You planted the flag Old Glory there,
Your thanksgiving hymn, your voiceless prayer,
Was freedom's flag at the Pole unfurled;
The Stars and Stripes at the top of the world."

"Yes, yes," she said coloring a little, "those naughty boys on the papers got that. They played a trick with me, but I don't mind; the papers have always treated me kindly and justly; though I would like you to say for me that the newspapers no longer mould the public opinion, as was proved by the last election."

"But, for goodness sake, do not let us get away from our subject—crime and death. Now, death is something I am really keen about," I interrupted.

This time she laughed heartily.

"You're a funny girl," she said. "You love crime and now you adore death—I see you have the artist's soul.

"The saddest part of it all is that it really takes a lifetime to understand a person, and no one can spend a lifetime judging a criminal. Crime takes but a moment, but justice an eternity.

"Therefore the best that we can do, the best that the judge can do, is to be as good a character reader as possible, a person who has almost occult powers, one who can discern at a glance all the little complexities that have gone into the making of the mistake."

"What of psycho-analysis—Freudism, you know?"

"I don't believe in it very much. It goes too far—digs down too deep; but I do believe in the psychological moment. Take a person at the edge, just before he goes over, a person with the knife lifted, one with the poison to his lips, he who is about to shoot, and you have a chance for redemption such as you will never have again and which you could not have had before. One always saves and loses the most at the edge of things."

"Do you think that Osborne's prison reform would have worked out well for the criminal?"

"I don't like to say yes or no to that. I do think that his ideas were good ones. I do think that prison reforms are good things. But the prisons as they were before were not as bad as they were painted."

Suggests Wholesale Segregation.

"What about a colony for criminals—a whole town, if you like, walled in as China is walled in—through which the criminal could express himself—a place with libraries, public squares, town hall, opera house, movies and garden—a place where crime could be developed into something beyond crime, beyond good and evil?"

"Ah, what a dreamer's idea that is!" she said.

"Yet, cannot criminals and fallen women teach things that none of us know, such things that we might be the better for?"

And now she rather surprised me.

"Yes, very many things," she replied. "I know of no honor that is at times more beautiful than that among thieves. I know of nothing more terrible and more tragic and more splendid than the feeling of fallen women for another who might fall.

"The honor among thieves reaches very often a sublime point, the effort of a fallen woman to save a sister has often brought tears to my eyes—but yet such honor and such unselfish feeling cannot

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